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Barack
Obama
The Politics of Hope



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WILLIAM MICHAEL DAVIS

Frontispiece: Barack Obama answers a question at a 2007 press conference.

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Chapter 1 THE SPEECH

The FleetCenter, located in Boston, Massachusetts, has witnessed its share of dramatic moments. The arena is home to two professional sports franchises: the National Basketball Association's Boston Celtics and the National Hockey League's Boston Bruins. Some of the biggest names in rock and pop music have also entertained fans there.

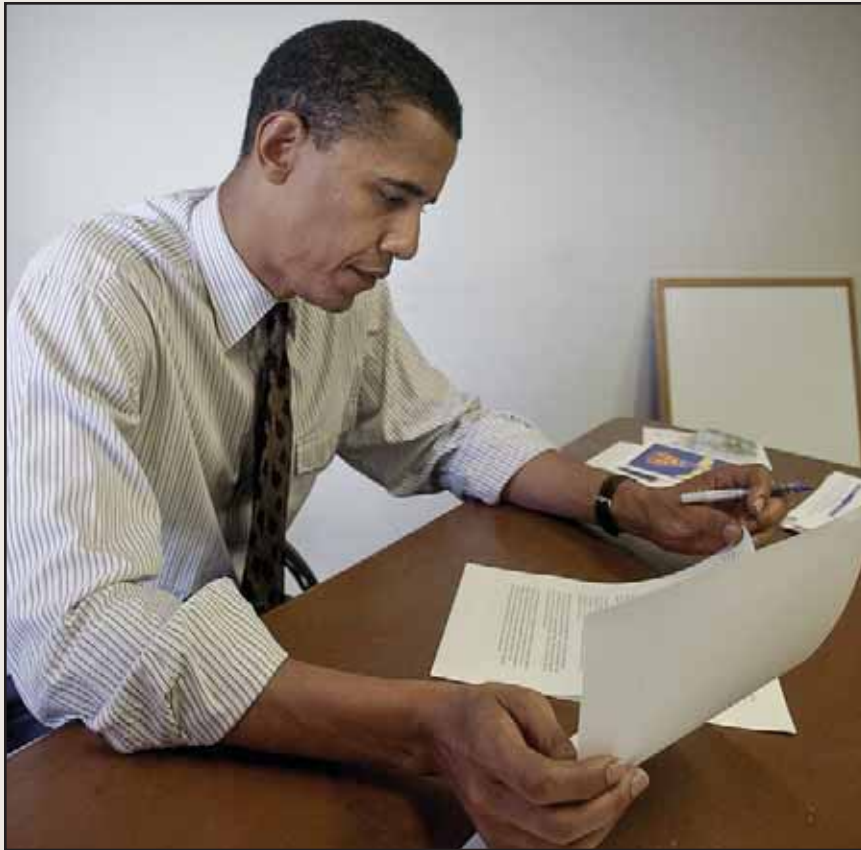
In late July 2004, however, the FleetCenter hosted a different kind of spectacle. The Democratic Party had chosen Boston as the site of its national convention, and delegates from the 50 states, along with a horde of journalists, packed the arena for four days of speeches that would culminate in the nomination of Senator John Kerry for president of the United States.

Barack Obama delivers the keynote address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention. The speech—in which Obama placed his unusual personal history within the framework of the American dream—touched on themes of diversity, community, hope, and responsibility. It thrust the little-known Illinois state senator into the national spotlight.



“IN NO OTHER COUNTRY ON EARTH”

Shortly after nine o'clock on the evening of July 27, a tall, slim man bounded onto the stage at the FleetCenter. As he took his place at the podium, the assembled delegates erupted into thunderous applause. Many of them—like most Americans—knew little or nothing about this man,



Five days before his appearance at the Democratic National Convention, Obama pores over a draft of his keynote address. “The process by which I was selected as the keynote speaker,” Obama would recall, “remains something of a mystery to me.” He made the most of the opportunity, however, delivering a speech many observers ranked among the most riveting ever heard at a national convention.



who had been selected for one of the highest honors in American politics: the honor of addressing his party’s convention as its keynote speaker.

He was an obscure state senator from Illinois with an unusual name: Barack Obama. He was a candidate for a vacant U.S. Senate seat but had yet to hold national office.

Obama waited for almost half a minute to let the applause subside. Then, in a rich baritone voice, he expressed his gratitude for the privilege of addressing the Democratic National Convention. “Tonight,” he said, “is a particular honor for me because, let’s face it, my presence on this stage is pretty unlikely.”

His presence on the stage was indeed unlikely, and not just because he was a newcomer to national politics. Barack Obama, the son of a Kenyan father and a Kansan mother, had grown up in Hawaii and Indonesia. It was not a typical background for an American politician.

As Obama delivered his keynote address, he wove his unique personal story into a larger narrative about the promise of America. “I stand here,” he said, “knowing that

A Skillful Writer

The keynote address to the 2004 Democratic National Convention—like most of the major speeches Barack Obama delivers—was written by Obama himself. This is somewhat unusual: most American politicians rely heavily on speechwriters.

Obama’s writing skills are considerable, and he has two best-selling books to his credit. In the opinion of *Time* columnist Joe Klein, Obama’s first book, *Dreams from My Father*, “may be the best-written memoir ever produced by an American politician.”



my story is part of the larger American story, that I owe a debt to all of those who came before me, and that, in no other country on earth, is my story even possible.”

He spoke a language of hope and optimism. He spoke a language of tolerance and dignity. And he spoke about common virtues and common dreams—the dreams of his white mother and grandparents, and the dreams of his black father and grandfather.

Obama acknowledged the power of individualism. But he also spoke of the connectedness of all Americans and the importance of community. “If there’s a child on the south side of Chicago who can’t read,” he declared, “that matters to me, even if it’s not my child. If there’s a senior citizen somewhere who can’t pay for her prescription and has to choose between medicine and the rent, that makes my life poorer, even if it’s not my grandmother. If there’s an Arab American family being rounded up without benefit of an attorney or due process, that threatens my civil liberties. It’s

that fundamental belief—I am my brother’s keeper, I am my sister’s keeper—that makes this country work. It’s what allows us to pursue our individual dreams, yet still come together as a single American family.”

He appealed to the better angels of a nation that had long been torn by acrimonious political fighting. To those who would continue to divide the nation for political gain, he declared that “there’s not a liberal America and a conservative America—

Obama on Obama

“

I’m somebody who believes in this country and its institutions. But I often think they’re broken.

”



there’s the United States of America. There’s not a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America; there’s the United States of America.”

INTIMATIONS OF GREATNESS

Obama’s speech held the convention delegates spellbound. Many observers judged the 17-minute oration among the most eloquent keynote addresses ever delivered.

Obama’s personal appeal was also undeniable. His youthful good looks, his easy smile, and his charisma captivated viewers present at the convention and viewers who watched the keynote address on television. Some older convention-goers and news commentators were reminded of two much-loved politicians from an earlier time: John and Robert Kennedy. And some political observers openly wondered when Barack Obama would himself run for president.

Given that the 42-year-old Obama had yet to win election to the Senate, this was an extraordinary leap. But then, Barack Obama’s life had already been an extraordinary and improbable odyssey.



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